



STRENGTHENING CITIZEN LEADERSHIP: EXAMPLARS FROM INDIA

PRIA in association with other partners started the intervention on strengthening citizen leadership with the expectation that a cadre of enlightened leadership and their networks would facilitate meaningful interface between citizen associations and various governance institutions to articulate their demands and access their rights and entitlements. The program although initiated as a stand-alone intervention in the beginning (in 2002), but became a cornerstone approach in the over all strategic and programmatic framework of PRIA from the beginning of 2003. According to the programmatic framework of PRIA “Governance Where People Matter” strengthening citizen collectives and citizen leadership was seen as instrument to strengthen the bottom-up demand for accountable and transparent local governance institutions including Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. PRIA and partners took a considered decision for not to creating new local level institutions. Efforts were made as a first step, to identify existing local community based organisations and their leadership. Therefore, women SHGs, Mahila Mandals, Youth Organisations, various project initiated committees like Watershed Committees, Water User Associations, Village Education Committees, Community Development Societies (formed under the Central Government sponsored programme on Swarna Jayanti Saheri Rozgar Yojna), organisation of Ex-Servicemen and many others were trained and mobilised. The existing community leaders were given training and educational input to act as citizen leaders to make interface with various other community based institutions as well as various state agencies and local governance institutions.

The interventions in the first two years (2002-2004) specifically encouraged and targeted women leadership. As a result a large number of SHGs and Mahila Mandals were included in the intervention. However, in the later years leadership of men particularly that of youth was also targeted while a consistent focus remained on developing women leadership.

A multi-track approach to capacity building for the citizen leaders and citizen collectives was undertaken to achieve the objectives. The following is a brief description of capacity building approaches.

(a) **Preparing Profiles of Citizen Collectives:** As a pre-requisite to engage, efforts were made to map the existing community based organisations to identify potential citizen leaders. A comprehensive database was prepared for all the Blocks and Municipalities where PRIA and partners were working. It was quickly realised that there are several active citizens in a given community who take part in a variety of collective actions or become helpful to other fellow neighbour in a variety of way. The community members recognise their contributions. Efforts were made to contact those citizens to weave the programme around their existing capacities.

(b) **Training for Citizen Collectives and Citizen Leaderships:** Series of short duration (one day to three days) training programmes for a variety of citizen collectives and citizen leadership were organised in most of the locations. The purpose of these training programmes ranged from building perspective on local governance and citizenship to enhancing skills on group

management, local level planning, Gram Sabha and Ward Sabha mobilisation, gender justice etc. In many places film shows were organised as learning tool. The purpose was to share stories of struggles by various other groups and to initiate discussion within the collective and community.

- (c) **Regular Meetings and Ongoing Support:** The intervention required regular meetings and ongoing support to the collectives and their leadership. In many places counselling, guidance and support to individual leaders proved to be useful. The members of the citizen collectives were provided support generally related to their daily needs. Since the collectives were in nascent stage almost in all locations, the collectives and leadership have often demanded handholding supports.
- (d) **Exposure Visits:** The purpose of organising the exposure visit was to facilitate learning for the citizen leaders on various development initiatives, which could be replicated by them. Since only select individuals could participate in those exposure visits, efforts were made that the learning acquired by the citizen leaders could be shared with other member of the collectives and community at large.
- (e) **Citizen Centred Interface Workshop/Meeting:** One of the expected outcomes of strengthening citizen collectives and citizen leadership intervention was to enable effective interface between citizens and governance institutions. In many locations various interface meetings and workshops have been facilitated to initiate dialogues. The purposes of these interface meetings ranged from initiating dialogues on specific development problems to disseminate information among citizen collectives.
- (f) **Organising Campaigns:** Series of campaigns have been organised on Pre-Election Voters' Awareness, Citizen Participation in Birth and Death Registration and Solid Waste Management. Folk medium like songs, dances and street plays were extensively used in these campaigns. Efforts were made to build ownership through involving the citizen collectives and leadership right from the planning to implementation of these campaigns.
- (g) **Facilitating Networks of Citizen Collectives:** Facilitating and catalysing networks of citizen collectives with specific focus on women, dalits and tribals were an explicit objective of civil society building interventions at the district and below level. The initiatives have started showing favourable results in many locations while posing deeper challenges to further strengthen these collectives.

Implications of Capacity Building

The pursuit of multi-track capacity building approaches and numerous interventions paid dividend to engage citizen leaders in initiating range of collective as well as individual actions at the community level. They not only undertook these tasks voluntarily but also led the collectives in social and political action from the front. Though engagements varied in nature, context and intensity and common thread could be found.

- (i) **Initiating self-help actions:** The citizen leaders themselves realised as well as caused the realisation among the community that they were not dependent on the state for each and every development activity. They became instrumentals in mobilising the citizens to undertake activities like renovating school buildings, contributing labour to build roads, cleaning of ponds etc. In many locations the citizens acted first by taking developmental initiatives and then the state authorities extended their support.
- (ii) **Engaging in bottom-up local level planning:** Despite decades of rhetoric on participatory bottom-up planning process, the Indian planning system remained by and large top-down. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts created opportunities for elected local governance institutions like Panchayats and Municipalities to initiate bottom-up planning process. However, denial of resources and capacities to these institutions by higher tier of governance institutions has been perpetuating the old traditions and power relationships. Notwithstanding with these denials in number of locations the citizen leaders got prepared to mobilise fellow citizens to prepare local level development plans at the Ward and Gram Panchayat levels in collaboration with the Panchayats or Municipalities. They organised extensive consultations at the village and Mohalla level with other citizen groups and identified development priorities of the citizens. Detailed plans have been prepared and shared with the local governance institutions to incorporate the development priorities in the annual plans. In some of these locations many citizen leaders not only ensured that the development priorities are incorporated in the plans of Panchayats and Municipalities but also actively remained engaged with these institutions till the actual work is initiated or completed. The perseverance of the citizen leaders paid off to the communities and the entire experience of engaging instilled lots of confidence into them to prepare for further engagements in the future.
- (ii) **Mobilising Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas:** Despite Constitutional provisions for mandatory Gram Sabhas at the Gram Panchayat level, much needs to be desired in terms of convening them as per provisions. A variety of reasons adversely affected the effectiveness of Gram Sabhas which have been discussed in detail elsewhere. Prominent among them are lack of information and apathy from the elected representatives as well as citizenry. Many citizen leaders after equipping themselves with relevant information and understanding acted as change agents by disseminating relevant information related to Gram Sabha dates, venue etc. to other Gram Sabha members. They articulated different development issues in the Gram Sabha and tried to improve the conduct of Gram Sabhas. Many of them have successfully chased the Block or District level authorities to announce the dates and venues in advance so that they could pass on information to other citizens.

The urban citizens of small and medium size towns of India were still deprived by any Constitutional Amendment of similar parallel mechanism like Gram Sabha in the urban locations. Notwithstanding with such disadvantage the citizens from many urban locations have formed Mohalla Samitis or Ward Sabhas with the active facilitation from PRIA and Partners. The citizen leaders after being trained and armed with information took the initiative to convene Ward Sabhas. They collectively identified the local development priorities and interacted with the elected councillors to incorporate these priorities in the plans and programmes of Municipalities. The elected councillors have also found new

citizen platforms in the form of Ward Sabhas or Mohalla Samitis to garner political support for the development of work in their respective Wards.

- (iii) ***Engaging with line departments for accessing services:*** Despite making the elected Panchayats and Municipalities Constitutionally responsible for provisioning basic services to the citizens, the sectoral line departments like drinking water, health, education etc. have remained the main service providers. They have also largely remained unaccountable to the elected local governance institutions and citizens. It left with no options for the citizens other than to engage with these sectoral service provisioning departments to demand for services that they require on a daily basis. There were numerous occasions where citizen leaders collectively in collaboration with the elected representatives demanded basic services from these departments. The issues they addressed ranged from drinking water to the functioning of primary schools, provisions of anganwadi centres in the villages, to roads and so on. These numerous interfaces have not always resulted into successful service provisioning due to deep-rooted unequal power relationships and unaccountable and non-responsive behaviour of the government officials. However, the engagements made modest beginning of exercising and articulating the basis rights of the citizens particularly of the poor and the marginalised.
- (iv) ***Engaging with governance institutions to address the issues of social injustice or social discrimination:*** The issues related to injustice and discrimination were not new in the society, however, the situations got exacerbated when the institutions of governance became instrumental for their perpetuity. In many situations, the women, dalits and tribals became subjected to atrocities by the powerful. In numerous occasions the citizen leaders from women, dalits and tribal groups after being enlightened through training, exposure and collectivisation refused to accept this sub-human subordination. They got mobilised and showed protest against discrimination as well as against the inaction of public authorities. The issue of domestic violence was taken up to the higher level authorities by many women's groups in many locations. The issue of land rights to dalits have been addressed through their own organisations.
- (v) ***Participating in Panchayat and Municipality elections:*** PRIA and partners in many states have launched massive campaigns prior to the elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities. The purpose of these campaigns has been to educate the citizens and contestants of local governance elected positions on the free and fair electoral processes. The citizen groups and leadership trained through this intervention participated in huge number in these Pre Election Voters' Awareness Campaigns both in urban and rural locations. They participated in the enumeration of voters' list, distribution of informational materials, organising "kala jathas" and also in door-to-door educational campaigns. A good number of citizen leaders either supported other credible citizen leaders to contest elections or they themselves contested the elections. These campaigns proved to be an excellent learning ground for the citizen leaders to participate in the local political processes and to gain visibility in the community.

Recent trends in the socio-political arena characterised by local level decentralisation and mechanisms for the political participation of the hitherto marginalised and poor have provided a



new climate to foster citizen leadership and citizen associations. Largely remained untapped both by the governance institutions and civil society. Very little input in the form of structured educational and mobilisational interventions has been provided to strengthen and encourage these leadership initiatives. The intervention of PRIA and partners on strengthening citizen leadership proved to be an exception in this regard.

By and large, most of the development initiatives by the governments, bilateral and multilateral donors and intermediary civil society organisations have resulted into the formation of community groups or associations to ensure the responsibility for delivering specific programmes. The community level user groups thus created mostly treated as an alternative vehicle of service delivery and cost sharing. Although these initiatives have created a good amount of “social capital” at the community level, the process of conscientisation – the mantra of the voluntary actions in the 70s - has not been adequately addressed through these community formations. The intervention to foster citizen leadership has helped to bring back the process of conscientisation of a large number of groups and individuals by collective reflection of the reality and taking appropriate actions.

Till date, the perspectives on individual rights have, by and large, guided the capacity building interventions. Although a necessity, it was not sufficient to enable citizens to assert and interface with other intermediary development agencies including intermediary civil society organisations and government institutions. The perspective of collectivisation and engagement of the citizens in collective actions has not been addressed in a systematic manner. Strong leadership at the grassroots level fostered through this intervention have made significant headway to effectively interface with other institutions, access information and other resources from government, local bodies, civil society organisations and market institutions.

A critical balance between developing perspective on citizenship and governance and honing up “social skills” (e.g. communication, mobilisation, managing the collectives etc.) became the basis of designing and nurturing capacity building support to these citizen leaders and collectives. This approach paid considerable dividend as evidenced from the key results achieved through this interventions.

A wide range of capacity building interventions including structured educational interventions like training, workshops, conferences, regular hand holding support, exposure visits and networking provided to nourish, develop and strengthen citizen leadership proved to be very useful. A multi-track approach to capacity building has been far more effective than to a single-track approach like only training or only campaign. The challenge, however, was to make all the approaches relevant for the learning of a large number of semi-literate or illiterate women and men.